

Article

Rewriting the Rape Victims: Feminist Approaches to Akalikai and Medusa

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Abstract: Differences based on Gender and Sex are always a confusing component in a patriarchal society. The cultural practices and the patriarchal beliefs project both as the same. To make constructed information or an idea into an accepted fact, the patriarchal society transforms such information or an idea into truth through repeated practices, cultural resources, and literary texts. Unimaginably, the epics are also used by patriarchal societies to spread those beliefs as truth. Given that, rape, sexual assault, is projected/ practised by the patriarchal society as a punishment on women to control, to avenge, and to bring them to their senses. The paper aims to read the women characters Akalikai and Medusa from the epics and the evolution of those characters in the rewritings to highlight the transformation of perspective. The paper's hypothesis is also to record the voices given to those voiceless women characters from the feminist point of view.

Keywords: sex-gender debate; society; rape; victim; feminism; myth

Introduction

In the contemporary scenario, scientific studies and critical theories prove that the term sex is about biological differences, and the term gender is based on the differences constructed by society and culture, depending on the roles and work done by humans. Thus, sex is the natural one as it is based on the biological difference, and gender is a constructed one as it is a cultural creation. Nevertheless, confusion over the terminologies of gender and sex is used positively by the patriarchal society. Eventually, the word sex and gender became one with the same meaning. Samuel Johnson's sixth edition of *A Dictionary of the English Language*, which was published in the 18th century, referred to gender as "masculine, feminine or neuter; or it could either mean a

'sex'"(Glover and Kalpan 2009 XI). Hence, slowly, the differences between these two terms got erased, and society preferred to use the word gender over sex.

This discourse of constructing a gender system as a natural one is accepted as a norm over time. Many great thinkers, who changed the world through their way of thinking, committed silly mistakes by accepting gender differences as natural and considering women as the weaker sex. Aristotle, a great philosopher, is of the view that women were inferior. In *Politics*, he writes, "the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject" (1895, 1.1254b). Moreover, he believed ignorantly that men were rational, strong, active, and perfect, and were capable of receiving an education and holding positions of power. According to him, women were irrational, weak, passive, and imperfect, and were not capable of abstract reasoning, hence bound to domestic work. Arthur Schopenhauer, a German philosopher, also shared a similar opinion. He believed that women are directly adapted to act as the nurses and educators of our early childhood, for the simple reason that they themselves are childish, foolish, and short-sighted – in a word, are big children all their lives, something intermediate between the child and the man... Many thinkers like Friedrich Nietzsche, Otto Weininger, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Charles Darwin shared a similar view, which highlighted women as inferior.

The patriarchal society wanted to have control over women by spreading its restrictive views as natural for the benefit of the society. Cultural practices and societal norms became the beliefs and truths of the societies. The French feminist Simone de Beauvoir claims, "One is not born, rather, *becomes* a woman". It explains that women are not accepted as a different sex based on their biological differences, but they are made to accept their differences in terms of behaviours, nature, and roles which are imposed upon them by society as a natural one. Hence, men and women are institutionalised to accept their roles and to occupy the superior and inferior roles without doubt. Judith Butler, in her article "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," explains the process of gender construction through specific day-to-day acts and how such acts transform as a cultural practice. Butler presents gender as an idea of the society where the bodies of women are expected to understand the limitations and to act accordingly. In addition, she mentions that societies make gender roles as norms through repeated acts and punishments. Consequently, the gender acts become shared experiences and collective actions, and they slowly become less individual-oriented. Thus, gender and heterosexuality, which were/are the societal constructs and historical products, become facts. Foucault, in his work *The History of Sexuality*, emphasises the role of society and culture in the construction of discourses about sexuality. Helen Cixous, in her masterpiece "The Laugh of Medusa," states that women were kept in an inevitably inferior position by conventional men and society. "The little girl and their 'ill-mannered' bodies immured, well-preserved, intact unto themselves, in the mirror. Frigidified. However, are they ever seething underneath! What an effort it takes-there's no end to it- for the sex cops to bar their threatening return. Such a display of forces on both sides that the struggle has for centuries been immobilized in the trembling equilibrium of a deadlock" (1976, 877). She believes that women are kept in 'darkness'

which forces women to accept whatever the society says as norms. "They have wandered around in circles, confined to the narrow room in which they have been given a deadly brainwashing" (ibid).

The role of art form in carrying a society's message is crucial. Among the art forms, storytelling plays a vital role in spreading cultural and societal norms in detail among the public. Stories, both in oral and written form, when they pass information from one generation to the next, become the truth and thus become the rules and orders of the society. Myth and Epic are types of stories that tell the lives of gods and humans of the past. Those stories were/are used to construct human values and cultural practices in society. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines myth as "a popular belief or tradition that has grown up around something or someone, *especially*: one embodying the ideals and institutions of a society or segment of society". According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "Epic poetry has been and continues to be used by peoples all over the world to transmit their traditions from one generation to another, without the aid of writing". Along with teaching human values, these epics and myths were/are used as a medium to spread the beliefs of the rulers. Thus, the epics and myths became the sources to construct gender roles of the patriarchal society, which slowly became the customs of the society. The failure of a woman to fulfill her duty or the expectations of society, which is again constructed by the patriarchal society, and the punishment she receives for neglecting her duty are elaborated in the epics and myths to teach lessons to society.

One such custom imposed upon the women's community by the patriarchal society is chastity. It even went to the extent of preaching that only women were/are the custodians of the concept of chastity and men did/do not have to bother about it. Chastity of a woman was/ is linked with the honour of the family, and very importantly, chastity is connected with the body of a woman. This discourse was spread through culture, and it was registered in epics and myths. The same plot or the similarity in the projection of characters could be found in the literature around in different languages from different countries. One such theme found in the Indian and Greek epics is sexual assault upon the women characters and their voiceless condition. According to Brownmiller, rape is an act of exhibiting the power of men. It is, "nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear" (1975, 15 *italics in the original*). Understandably, sexual assault does not happen only due to sexual urges. "The desire for sex or lust is not always the sole explanation of rape. Rape is an issue of power and control, with men using physical and other forms of violence to maintain a dominant position over women. In some cases, it is a manifestation of rivalry between two or more groups. Incidents of rape can be politically motivated to inflict retribution on political opponents" (Usha Tandon and Sidharth Luthra 2016, 2).

Research Questions:

The paper examines the cultural aspect of the act of rape in the stories of Akalikai and Medusa in ancient literature. The similarity between these two characters is not only that they are both rape victims, but the punishment for the cruel act was undergone only by these female characters, and the responsible culprits were left

without punishment or with less intensive punishment. Moreover, they were not given a voice to express their agony, whereas they depended upon a male character to narrate their trauma. In a way, these two characters are used to construct behavioural patterns for the women in those societies and to institutionalise their silent bearing of the punishment given by the patriarchal societies. According to Kylie Roger, “these stories are also loaded with misogyny and the objectification and villainization of female characters, and these messages, though not as obvious, are nonetheless passed along to readers and listeners over time” (2021, 3). The hypothesis of the paper is

1. To read the similarity of the injustice faced by two women characters, Akalikai from the Indian epic and Medusa from the Greek myth, and the institutionalisation of the same through literature.
2. To analyse the rewritings of these two characters from contemporary literature to highlight sex as natural.
3. To project the attempt of the modern writers to be the visionaries of gender-neutral societies by destroying the institution of patriarchal ideology. By doing so, the paper aims to present the movement of the marginal characters to the centre and the writers' ability to provide a voice to the voiceless characters.

Akalikai in Indian Works:

Akalikai is depicted as the most beautiful woman in the Indian epic *The Ramayana*. One could find different versions of the Akalikai's story from Valmiki's *The Ramayana* to the present-day rewritings in Tamil literature. The Akalikai story's origin is the work of Valmiki. He narrates about Akalikai's redemption from her sin by Lord Rama. Readers get to know the story of Akalikai when Sage Vishwamithra narrates it to Lord Rama. The story reveals that Akalikai, the most beautiful woman, was married to the sage Gowthama. Lord Indira, who could not control his desire for Akalikai (the name used in Valmiki's work), came in the disguise of Sage Gowthama and had a sexual union with Akalikai. Though Akalikai identifies him as Indira, due to her pride (as he is the Lord of Devas), she accepts it. Later, she reveals it to him and asks him to leave the place quickly without her husband's knowledge. Sage Gowthama, who comes there on time, curses both. This story is modified in the version of Kambar's *Ramamayanam* and the later versions of Tamil Literature. The great poet Kambar followed the practices and beliefs of his society and modified Akalikai's character from Valmiki's *Ramayana*. In Kambar's story, Akalikai is an innocent one who was cheated by Lord Indira in the disguise of her husband. When they indulge in the relationship, an inexperienced pleasure drives her away. She merely identifies the new feeling rather than doubting the person in disguise. She was punished by the sage Gowthaman, her husband, for not identifying Indira, who was in disguise. He states that an impure body is like a stone, and she was cursed to be a stone. Though it was not her mistake, she was blamed and punished for not identifying the stranger in the disguise of her husband. In both versions of *Ramayana*, Akalikai's story is narrated by the Sage Vishwamithra and Kambar, and Akalikai was not given a chance to express her views. The other versions of Akalikai's story in the ancient Tamil literature followed Kambar's Akalikai, depicting her being molested by Lord Indira.

Medusa in Greek Works:

The character of Medusa is projected as a monster with snakes on her head in Greek mythology. Her head is filled with snakes instead of hair, and she has the power to transform a man who looks into her eyes into a stone. Till the 8th BCE, Medusa was projected as a Gorgon, meaning 'terrible', 'grim', and 'fierce'. Hesiod, a Greek writer, in his work *Theogony*, depicted Medusa as a monster without describing her physical appearance by following the way she was depicted in the Greek oral tradition. Homer, in his masterpiece *Odyssey*, describes the physiognomy of Medusa thus: "the monster's head, the Gorgon" (2018, 11.636). Later, Aeschylus, in his famous Greek tragedy titled *Prometheus Bound*, portrayed Medusa with her sisters as the "three winged sisters, loathed enemies of humankind, the snake-haired Gorgons, whom no man can see and live" (1961, 798-799). In the *Twelfth Pythian Ode*, Pindar mentions Medusa for the first time as a beautiful woman, "fierce Gorgon's deathly dirge", the "snaky heads of the maidens", and the head of the "beautiful-cheeked Medusa" (1997, 12.7-16). In the work of Pseudo-Apollodorus, he described the three sisters with similar physical appearance. His description goes thus, "heads with scaly serpents coiled around them, and large tusks like those of swine, and hands of bronze, and wings of gold which gave them the power of flight; and they turned all who beheld them to stone" (ibid. 11.4).

In the above-stated works, Medusa was described as one among the three sisters; only their appearance and their power to turn men into stone were mentioned without much emphasis on Medusa. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* elaborated on the story of Medusa, her transformation from a beautiful maiden to a monster with the power to turn men into stone due to a curse. According to Ovid, only Medusa had snakes instead of hair among the sisters. It is only from Ovid's version that Medusa emerged as an individual character with a story of her past. Till then, she was described just as a monster with the power to turn men to stone until Perseus killed her. When Perseus was describing his adventurous journey, where he encountered many dangers and killed many, the listeners were keen to know about Medusa. One of the listeners asked why Medusa, alone, unlike her sisters, had snakes instead of hair. Ovid added a new version to the story of Medusa by presenting a past. Perseus said that once, Medusa was the most beautiful woman, famous for her hair. She had many admirers and suitors. Neptune, lord of the seas, fell for her beauty and raped her in the temple of Minerva. The goddess Minerva, who was upset about the violation of her temple, punished Medusa by transforming her into a snake-haired monster. She was further cursed that she would turn a man who maintains eye contact with her into a stone. (2004, 4.753-803) Though Medusa was given an individual plot in Ovid's work, she was not given a chance to tell her story. Instead, her story was narrated through Perseus, who killed her.

Comparison:

In both cases, the female protagonists were raped, and they were punished with a curse. The etymology of the word rape is from the Latin word 'rapere', meaning "to snatch, to grab, to carry off". Over time, the term denoted sexual violence. In Tamil, the word 'karpazhipu' is the equivalent word for rape, which means removing chastity, and

presently this term is replaced by *vanpunarvu*. For several centuries, these two female characters were used by society to preach moral values to the children, targeting only the girl children. They were taught that rape was a punishment for their beauty and pride. Hence, they were advised to stay at home and do the domestic work quietly. Society never tried to find the reason for leaving the male culprit who indulged in the disgusting act without (severe) punishment in the epics. These preachings enabled the society to run successfully with its patriarchal notions. Hence, woman "... has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty (guilty of everything, guilty at every turn: for having desires, for not having any; for being frigid, for being "too hot"; for not being both at once; for being motherly and not enough; for having children and for not having any; for nursing and for not nursing... She is reduced to being the servant of the militant male, his shadow" (Cixous 1976, 880). Accordingly, both works present the patriarchal norms of the society that imposed the characterisation and behaviour of women characters. Though men indulged in the crime, the women characters facing punishment indicate the victim-blaming concept, which is still prevalent in society. The victims, instead of being supported by society, were cursed with a punishment, and no one questioned it in the epics. Akalikai, despite being described as a 'person without any mistake' (*maasilaal*), was punished as her body became impure. Though Lord Indira was also cursed, he got redemption sooner than Akalikai. In the case of Medusa, the goddess Minerva punished Medusa for polluting her temple and left Neptune unpunished.

The above-discussed works aim to present the patriarchal preaching of societies that wanted to have control over women and left the offenders free. Such projections strengthened the patriarchal norms of the society. Radical feminists believe that rape is a weapon used by the patriarchy to impose its norms and to have control over women, and it is seen as "rape is about power and control, not sex". Griffin shares this perspective: "rape is not an isolated act that can be rooted out from patriarchy without ending patriarchy itself" (1971, 35). Added to that, the male characters narrated both of their stories at the time of their redemption or death. It highlights the societal practices of the patriarchal society, where women, despite their victim positions, were not given a chance to express their opinions.

Rewriting the Rape Survivors:

Re-reading/writing the characters from the epic has become a ubiquitous endeavour in contemporary literature. Rewritings of such marginalised characters enable the readers to look at the other side of the characters. Cixous's view about the emergence of new women from the old is finally taking place through such re-writings from the feminist perspective. She states, "It is time to liberate the New Woman from the Old by coming to know her-by loving her for getting by, for getting beyond the Old without delay, by going out ahead of what the New Woman will be, as an arrow quits the bow with a movement that gathers and separates the vibrations musically, in order to be more than herself" (1976, 878). Many minor characters or least-known characters from the epics are analysed critically and given a chance to speak their views in the rewritings. "The very recent wave of retellings of ... myths through the female

perspective . . . are incredibly important narratives to be told, because they too reveal the opportunities for social and political progress that arise from taking female characters from classic ... myths and giving them the autonomy and voice that they lack in the original versions" (Rogers 2021, 3). In the case of Akalikai and Medusa, many such re-writings, especially from the feminist point of view, have been found since the 20th century. The study takes Prapanjan's *Akalikai* and Ann Stanford's poem "Medusa" to analyse the rewritings of the rape victims as well as to record the transformation of societal views.

Prapanjan is a renowned Tamil writer and critic. His drama *Akalikai* (1983) is written with a feminist perception of the character Akalikai. In his projection of Akalikai's story, Prapanjan reduced the part of Sage Gowthamar and Lord Ramar. He enabled Akalikai to narrate her story to the sage Viswamithra. When Lord Ramar & Lakshmanar and Sage Viswamithra reach the hermitage, Akalikai invites them. She is projected as living alone (separated from her husband), and there is no mention of curse and redemption from it. When Lord Rama says that he came to know of her life from the sage on their way, Akalikai says that it was a perception of the historians, which is not a fact. Then she blames Lord Ramar that he cannot understand human emotions and their individuality, because, like his ancestors, he too promotes societal rules and restrictions. Here, through this, Akalikai is trying to blame the partial rules of the patriarchal society, which only favour males. Later, the discussion continues between Akalikai and sage Vishwamithra. In the process of defending her action, Akalikai mentions sage Sakraayan, who, with his wife, ate the ingested food (as a lower caste person tasted it) from a mahout to prevent death. The patriarchal society accepted this as a way to safeguard life. Similarly, when her husband was not bothered about her bodily needs and to reduce the hunger of her body, she indulged in the act of sexual union, which is not a sin. Though Sage Viswamithra accepts what Gowthaman has done as a mistake, she blames her for being a traitor.

Akalikai narrates another incident from her past that serves as an answer to that blame. As a twist in the story of Akalikai, Prapanjan presents that Akalikai and Lord Indira were in love earlier, which was presented in some of the rewritings of Akalikai's story. When she was questioned about her life with her husband, she replied that though she lived with Gowthama, during their physical intimacy, she always held Indira in her mind. She always felt that she was having sexual intercourse with Indira, her lover. Hence, when Indira came, she had a relationship with him. Thus, she could not accept the blame as a prostitute from Gowthama. Despite several rewritings of Akalikai's stories in Tamil, Prapanjan's writing is unique and intense as it enables the woman character to present her sexual desire without shame or fear. The tone of her justification enables the readers to understand the emotions and needs of women, which were darkened for many centuries by the male-dominant society.

Ann Stanford is an American poet and translator. Her poem "Medusa" gave a voice to Medusa to express her pain and anger. Moreover, the poem presents the reason for the transformation of Medusa as her inner self and not her fate or the divine curse. When the poem begins, she mentions Neptune by addressing 'god' and then as 'the old

man'. Her narration presents his entry into the temple and the grace in his appearance. The poem describes the sexual assault of Medusa by Neptune at the altar of the goddess Athena. Till then, in all the writings and rewritings of the Medusa character, the patriarchal society very cunningly omitted the word 'rape'. It is Stanford's poem that uses the word rape for the first time while describing the incident. "He seized and raped me before Athena's altar."

Regarding the rape, Medusa complains that without getting her consent, Neptune molested her. She further continues that she never expected that god could do such a thing. The constant remembrance of the god's "misdeed.../the iron arm, the fall, the marble floor/ the stinking breath, the sweaty weight, the pain, /the quickening thrust" left her with feelings of disgust and rage. These feelings transformed her; the fury of her hair replaced it with ferocious snakes, and the thought of revenge erased the feelings of compassion and replaced them with stone. Slowly, she became her thoughts. "My hair turned serpents, my eyes saw the world in stone". Medusa in the poem confesses that she does not like her transformation as she has changed the world she liked into stone. She longs to go to a new place to be herself. "I would like to wake up in another place, /look for myself again," but the fear of sexual assault stops her from doing it. Despite many rewritings of Medusa, Ann Stanford's poem describes the pain of sexual violence. It transforms Medusa from the position of a victim to a survivor by enabling her to describe her experience. Added to the transformation from the position of victim to survivor, Stanford gave voice to a 'monster' who was not allowed to talk about the reason for her transformation but was only viewed with fear and aversion for many centuries. This poem enabled the readers to understand the trauma undergone by Medusa (which could be equated with the trauma of rape victims), which was the prime reason for her hatred. This anger, in a way, led her to live in isolation. "My furious glance destroyed all live things there. / I was alone. I am alone. My ways/ divide me from the world, imprison me in a stare". A comment given about the rewriting of Medusa could be applied to the writing of Prapanjan's Akalikai. These writings lead the reader to question the status that rape has had in literature historically, where the rape of mythical women has been accepted as part of the historical narrative without consideration of the feelings of individual women who undergo the same process in reality (Kirkby).

Conclusion:

The above-discussed re-writings of the characters from ancient literature, especially the feminist perspectives of these works in the modern period, helped those characters to gain their voice. With this regard, Rogers expands thus, "[m]any of the issues brought to light by these retellings, such as the narrative of victim-blaming and the chilling normalization of the mistreatment of women..." (2021, 3-4). These works allowed the survivors (who were mentioned as victims earlier) to speak for themselves by erasing the space given for victim-blaming. Prapanjan changes the story of Akalikai and allows her to defend herself. The flow of her talk represents her anger against society, as it did not allow her to talk for several centuries. Through his work, he changed rape to a consented/desired intercourse where women have complete freedom

to select their partner. Moreover, the frustration of not being given a chance to express her decisions and reasons in the epic allowed Akalikai to use the opportunity to represent the silenced women's community. Her attack on the patriarchal society and the imposition of stringent rules exclusively upon women breaks the glass ceiling that controls women. The first-person narration in the poem 'Medusa' enables the readers to understand the pain and anger of the survivors of sexual violence. Moreover, it helps the readers to understand the psychology of the survivors of sexual assault. Feelings of pain, fear, loneliness, and hatred are expressed by the speaker of the poem. The poem indicates the transformation of Medusa's life and her perception of the world before and after the sexual assault incident. People whom she loved and the place where she grew up changed as stone due to her anger. This incident changed her inner self and her life. Though she tries to change herself, the anger within her makes her more aggressive.

Rewritings of the epic characters by Prapanjan and Ann Stanford gave importance to projecting the feelings of the women characters rather than institutionalising the moral values of the patriarchal society. Such re-writings encourage readers to question the moral values of the societies that restrict women from achieving equality. Added to that, they encourage the youngsters to understand women as fellow human beings who have emotions and feelings like men. Very importantly, the mythical characters in re-writings are provided with subjective positions, who can defend themselves, rather than being in the objective position, where they are expected to speak for them. Gaining subject position in the rewritings indicates a positive transformation in the women's lives in society.

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